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REVIEW

Helen O'Grady, *Woman's Relationship with Herself: Gender, Foucault, and Therapy* (London & New York: Routledge, 2005), ISBN 0415331269

Foucault's work has been enormously influential in feminist theory on the relationship between normalization and sex/gender; *Woman's Relationship with Herself: Gender, Foucault, and Therapy* considers this relationship in the context of personal therapy. Helen O'Grady's driving question is: "how can personal therapy assist women to counteract practices of self-policing?" In the first two chapters, she sets out to illustrate the dominance of the practice of self-policing in the contemporary West, and the relationship between self-policing and gender. O'Grady's concept of self-policing, which she defines as "a range of debilitating internal practices"¹ is derived from Foucauldian feminists Jana Sawicki² and Sandra Lee Bartky³ and Foucault's *Discipline & Punish*. For O'Grady the practice of self-policing involves individuals taking up a range of dominant norms and discourses, such as the norm of femininity, individual autonomy, and individual responsibility, and engaging in an unremitting practice of assessing one's performance against these norms. Drawing on feminist elaborations of Foucault's work in *Discipline and Punish*, O'Grady argues that a range of socio-historical forces have resulted in self-policing being relatively more prevalent among women and comparatively more damaging for them. In part, this is because it helps tie women to norms and practices that "play a key role in maintaining aspects of women's subordination".⁴ At the same time women are "vulnerable to heightened experiences of self-policing" because of "the absence of a cultural context" that encourages a balance between caring for oneself and caring for others.⁵ Women are incited to neglect practices of self-care and to "monitor rigorously their thoughts, feelings, desires, speech and actions to ensure conformity to accepted rules or the approval of others".⁶ O'Grady

¹ O'Grady, *Woman's Relationship with Herself*: 4

² Jana Sawicki. *Disciplining Foucault: Feminism, Power and the Body*, (New York: Routledge, 1991)

³ Sandra Lee Bartky. *Femininity and Domination: studies in the phenomenology of oppression* (New York & London: Routledge)

⁴ O'Grady, *Woman's Relationship with Herself*, 27

⁵ Ibid: 31-2

⁶ Ibid: 31-2

argues that processes of normalization cannot be addressed without “addressing power's hold at the intra-subjective level of women's self-relations.”⁷

In the following three chapters, she examines a range of practices that can be used within a therapeutic environment to challenge these intra-subjective relations, namely practices of self-policing. Working across a range of literatures including psychology, feminist theory, Foucault's later works, and feminist critiques of these works, O'Grady draws elements from each that can counter-act self-policing and brings these elements together. The wide range of literature from gender studies and psychology that O'Grady brings into conversation with Foucault's work is a strength of *Woman's Relationship with Herself*. Moving back and forth between Foucault's work and these literatures O'Grady develops practical models and approaches that can be used within a therapeutic environment to counteract self-policing and thus to challenge limiting gendered, class and ethnic identities.

Foucault's work informs *Woman's Relationship with Herself* in two primary ways. Firstly, O'Grady draws upon his work in *Discipline and Punish* to establish her argument that self-policing has “soul destroying effects”. Disciplinary power links individuals to bio-power through an incitement to internalize “group norms” and to constantly monitor and assess ones own behaviour and performance to determine if it is average, below average and so on.⁸ This self-policing “tends to give rise to a strict overseer type of relation to the self which precludes spontaneity and keeps individuals tied to prescribed identities.”⁹ O'Grady argues that the effects of this self-policing include “a debilitating type of self-criticism, unfavourable comparisons with others and personal isolation”.¹⁰ Secondly, O'Grady examines Foucault's analysis of the Hellenistic ethic of caring for the self and the degree to which it provides useful techniques and insights to challenge self-policing. Although O'Grady ultimately concludes that Foucault's works on the care of the self provide limited resources for challenging self-policing, she identifies two significant elements. Firstly, the challenge the Hellenistic ethic of caring for oneself presents to the Western dichotomy of “self –and other – directed care”¹¹ is significant for women whose training in caring for others has frequently “entailed forsaking oneself as a person deserving equal consideration.”¹² A second significant element for O'Grady is that this ethics does not take the form of a universal law but involves a particular art of life that requires individuals to develop practical wisdom about how to act in a range of circumstances. O'Grady's engagement with Foucault's *Discipline and Punish* extends the existing Foucauldian feminist literature by analyzing the specific way that psychological therapy or counselling is frequently implicated in perpetuating

7 Ibid: 43

8 Ibid: 19

9 Ibid: 122

10 Ibid: 9

11 Ibid: 83

12 Ibid.

the identities and norms that are prescribed for women. Her engagement with Foucault's studies on care of the self extends the existing literature by suggesting links between the concepts derived in these studies and feminist work on love and women's friendship.

Early in *Woman's Relationship with Herself* O'Grady defines self-policing as "a range of debilitating internal practices"¹³ and for the most part this definition is maintained throughout the text. However, O'Grady wavers in her definition of self-policing at two points and appears to suggest that any form of self-monitoring and regulation of one's behaviour and thoughts is self-policing. For me, this wavering highlights a missed opportunity to engage more deeply with Foucault's later works on the self and some problems with the concept of 'self-policing' as it is developed in *Woman's Relationship with Herself*. The first wavering occurs near the end of the second chapter where O'Grady argues that while *Woman's Relationship with Herself* is concerned with

the type of self-policing practices which give rise to harsh and debilitating relations with the self and which tie women to unwanted or unsatisfactory self-understandings there are many self-policing practices which do not fall into the first category and are of little concern, in terms of their effects. These might include taking reasonable care of one's health to ensure quality of life or behaving in ways that enable one to live in relative harmony with others; there are also useful habituated disciplines such as washing clothes, replenishing food supplies and generally following established procedures for a whole range of mundane activities.¹⁴

At the end of the following chapter, O'Grady raises another possible definition of self-policing. While arguing that the effect of self-policing and the intensity of self-policing efforts may vary across women, she concludes that for marginalized groups self-policing may be an important survival strategy. Self-policing "can offer self-protection by helping to detect or predict potentially denigrating or dangerous situations" and "in this sense, self-policing can be experienced as empowering."¹⁵ In both cases, O'Grady suggests that any regular systematic monitoring or assessment of one's behaviour or one's relationship with others is a form of self-policing. In the latter case, O'Grady further suggests that practices of self-policing include practices through which the individual prepares herself to avoid denigrating or dangerous situations. Her analysis in the first two chapters suggests that what distinguishes the "harsh and debilitating" self-policing that she is concerned with from all other forms of self-policing is that the former involves the individual regulating her thoughts and actions in relation to singular norms while the latter does not. However, this distinction is only implied. While O'Grady turns to Foucault's later works in the second half of *Woman's Relationship with Herself*, an engagement with these works in the early chapters would have helped to clarify at a conceptual level the specific

¹³ Ibid: 4

¹⁴ Ibid: 6

¹⁵ Ibid: 38

elements that distinguish the forms of self-policing O'Grady wants to transform from those forms that "are of little concern."¹⁶ In particular, Foucault's elucidation of the differences between Christian and Hellenistic practices of the self - the Christian practices of self-renunciation, self-subordination, and objectification of the self versus the Hellenistic practices of constituting the self, autonomy, and being a true subject - may have been useful in developing this distinction. That, said, the detailed examination of self-policing in *Woman's Relationship with Herself* provides grounds for future feminist engagements on the relationship between normalization and women's practices of self.

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